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ABSTRACT

A survey of 184 regular classroom teachers at a summer workshop at a state university in the Rocky Mountain Region investigated teacher knowledge and attitudes about linguistic diversity in the classroom. Data was gathered on the teachers' background, kind and amount of assistance provided to teachers with limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in their classes, perceptions about teaching LEP students, and attitudes toward having LEP students in their classrooms. Results indicate that: (1) teachers had misconceptions about teaching language learning; (2) they did not often receive the kind of support needed for teaching students in this population; and (3) negative language attitudes may be a barrier to a positive learning experience for the LEP child and other students in the classroom. Policy recommendations include additional support for teachers of LEP students, and pre- and in-service training regarding language learning. It is also seen as important for teachers to examine their own language attitudes. (MSE)

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Teacher Attitudes About Language Differences*

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Running Head: LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

This paper examines the attitudes of regular classroom teachers (primarily at the early childhood and elementary levels) toward children who are limited in their English proficiency (LEP). We explored teachers' background knowledge about how to teach LEP children, the kinds of resources available to classroom teachers who must teach LEP children, and the structure of teachers' attitudes toward LEP students. In general, while teachers were likely to have an LEP child (who might speak a language ranging from Spanish to Chinese to Sesotho) in class at some point in their career, teachers had a number of misconceptions about language learning among LEP students. Secondly, while teachers, on the whole, were well meaning, they were ill prepared to teach LEP students. There was not much in the way of resources (e.g., informational support from colleagues, specialists, State Office of Education administrators; inservice training) available to the teachers. Finally, teacher attitudes about language diversity influenced their willingness to work with LEP children. We conclude with a number of policy recommendations to assist classroom teachers who work with LEP students.

Teacher Attitudes About Language Differences

There are millions of school-aged children in the United States who are limited in their English proficiency (Soto, 1991). These numbers are rising dramatically primarily through immigration. Classroom teachers, who typically have little or no training in second-language learning, must provide instruction to children whose native languages are diverse (e.g., Somalian, Tongan, Afghanistani, to name only a few) (Waggoner & O'Malley, 1985).

If teachers are going to be effective working with limited-English-proficient (LEP) children, then they must have proper training, assistance (e.g., resources, advice), and positive attitudes about language diversity (Byrnes & Cortez, in press). Proper training for teachers is crucial since misconceptions about second-language learning may act as barriers to working with linguistic-minority students. One of the most widespread misconceptions about second-language learning is that children learn a language more rapidly than adults. In fact, this is not the case (Cheng, 1987; Soto, 1991). Children may seemingly learn more quickly than adults, but that is because children are more likely than adults to be in situations where they can use the language (e.g., in school). Also, language-competence expectations are lower for children than adults. Formal language-learning training can also make teachers aware of appropriate strategies for

working with linguistic-minority students. For example, teachers could learn how to present appropriate content to LEP students, to have realistic expectations of LEP children, and to use the student's native language as a vehicle to teach English (Byrnes & Cortez, in press).

Language learning is facilitated when teachers have positive attitudes about language diversity and show an interest in cultural sharing. Teachers' attitudes about language are complex and both positive and negative sentiments may be communicated to students. Do teachers celebrate linguistic/cultural diversity? Are teachers chauvinistic about the English language? Do teachers support formal training to teach English as a second language? Do teachers have positive feelings about having LEP children in their classrooms?

If teachers have constructive attitudes about language diversity, this not only benefits LEP children but other students as well. Native-English speakers can learn to appreciate language differences from LEP classmates and, if experiences are constructive, language prejudices can be reduced (Byrnes & Cortez, in press).

This study examines linguistic diversity in public schools. Specifically, we report on the knowledge teachers have about second-language learning, the resources available

to teachers who have LEP children in their classrooms, and the attitudes teachers possess about language diversity.

Method

Subjects

Teachers (N=184) attending summer workshops at a state university in the Rocky Mountain region participated in this study. Demographic variables describing these teachers are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Instruments

Respondents completed a questionnaire that included background information (e.g., number of years teaching) (see Table 1), degree of assistance provided to teachers with LEP children by various educators and administrators, informational items about teaching LEP students, a series of attitude questions concerning language diversity, and a question to assess whether a teacher would like an LEP child in his or her classroom. Subjects were informed that their participation would be voluntary and responses to the instruments would be strictly confidential and anonymous.

The degree of assistance provided to teachers was assessed by the question: "If you have worked with [LEP] students, how helpful (in terms of advice, resources, and assistance) have

the following persons been?" The persons include: fellow teachers, school specialists, principal, school-district specialists, State Office of Education specialists, and University or college instructors. Response categories included: "very helpful," "somewhat helpful," "not helpful," "not contacted," and "not applicable."

The informational items about teaching LEP children were: "If a child enters first grade at age six and does not speak English, approximately how long do you think it will normally take him or her to learn English well enough to participate with full understanding in a regular classroom?" The response categories were: "less than 1 year," "1-2 years," "2-4 years," "4-6 years," "6-8 years." The next three informational questions were Likert-scale items; responses ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questions were: "Children learn a foreign language more rapidly and more easily than adults," "Parents of non- or limited-English-proficient students should be counseled to speak English with their children whenever possible," and "At school, the learning of the English language by non- or limited-English-speaking children should take precedence over learning subject content." These last two items were considered knowledge questions because of the strong scholarly consensus regarding the inappropriateness of these practices.

To measure teachers' attitudes toward linguistic diversity, we constructed the "Language-Attitudes Scale." Subjects were asked to respond to 13 Likert-scale items. (The scale is reproduced in the Appendix.) Item responses were scored such that the higher the scale score, the less tolerant the subject was about linguistic diversity. Items were scored: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. The 13-item scale had a mean of 34.62 (SD=9.35); the range was 13-65; the alpha reliability coefficient was .70.

Finally, the willingness to have an LEP child in one's classroom was measured by the question: "In general, how do you feel about having children in your classroom who speak little or no English?" The responses were on a scale of 1-7; 1 was "I feel strongly that I would rather not have these children in my classroom" and 7 was "I feel strongly that I would like to have these children in my classroom." The mean score was 4.26 (SD=1.5).

Analyses

Initially, we generated descriptive information on the respondents in our study (see Table 1), the kinds of assistance they received to teach LEP children (see Table 2), the nature of the information the respondents have about teaching LEP students (see Table 3). We then factor analyzed the language-diversity attitude items and assessed the

reliability and validity of the attitude scale (see Table 4). Finally, we measured the association among the language-diversity factors and the variable assessing one's willingness to have an LEP student in the classroom (see Table 5).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Tables 1-3 show descriptive information about the respondents. The vast majority of respondents were elementary-school teachers (77%). Seventy-six percent of respondents have, at one time, had an LEP student in class. Few respondents had any formal training in teaching LEP students (8%). Over half (55%) of respondents did not speak (even somewhat) a language other than English. Seventy percent of respondents had traveled in a country where they did not understand the language. Most respondents (95%) had training beyond the bachelor's degree. The mean number of years teaching was about eight. The mean age of respondents was just under 40.

Table 2 shows that teachers of LEP students are likely to seek assistance from fellow teachers. As the status and social distance of the contact person increases, classroom teachers are less likely to seek help. For example, a classroom teacher is much more likely to contact a fellow teacher than his or her principal. This may be because the

fellow teacher is perceived as more knowledgeable and is generally more accessible.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 reports respondents' answers to information items about teaching LEP students. On the whole, teachers had a number of misconceptions in this area. Correct responses ranged from 5% to 40%.

Insert Table 3 about here

Factor Analysis

A principal component factor analysis with oblique rotation yielded a four-factor solution (see Table 4). The items loading on the first factor had in common that they referred to language politics (3 items, M=9.1, SD=2.4, alpha reliability coefficient=.64). The three-item, second factor referred to language support (M=6.7, SD=2.1, alpha reliability coefficient=.51). The third factor (4 items, M=9.8, SD=2.6, alpha reliability coefficient=.61) referred to LEP intolerance. The fourth and final factor referred to learning English at the risk of losing one's native language. It was a three-item factor (M=9.0, SD=2.2, alpha reliability coefficient=.49).

Insert Table 4 about here

Reliability and Validity

The reliability measure was a test of internal consistency among language-attitude items. The alpha reliability coefficient for the items was .70.

The construct validity of the language-attitude items was assessed by their association with the "desire-to-have-an-LEP-student-in-class" measure. The correlation coefficients between the "desire-LEP-student" score and each of the language-attitude factors are reported in column one of Table 5. All coefficients were statistically significant at or below the .01 level.

Insert Table 5 about here

The face validity of the language-attitude items was established through the straightforward content of the items themselves. Each item directly addressed language attitudes.

Finally, the intercorrelation of scores on the language-attitude factors was, for the most part, moderately high (see Table 5). This indicated that, while the factors were related, they measured different aspects of language attitudes.

Discussion

The number of language-minority children in public schools has increased dramatically in recent years. To properly educate LEP students, teachers need to be knowledgeable about language learning, have the support to address the special needs of LEP children, and possess attitudes that will make working with LEP students an admittedly challenging but rewarding experience for the teacher, the LEP child, and the other students as well.

Our findings suggested that teachers in fact had misconceptions about language learning. Secondly, teachers did not often receive the kind of support (e.g., resources, advice) they needed for teaching LEP children. Finally, to the extent that a desire to have an LEP student in one's class was associated with language attitudes, negative language attitudes may be a barrier to a positive learning experience for the LEP child as well as other students in a classroom. Perhaps the most important point to keep in mind is that it is not only a matter of an LEP child learning in the classroom, teachers and other students have much to gain also from language diversity and cultural sharing.

Conclusion

The policy recommendations we would offer on the basis of our findings are: teachers need to be given more support when they have an LEP student in their classrooms. Teachers often

reported feeling isolated and helpless when faced with the daunting task of integrating a non-English-speaking child in the classroom. Secondly, teachers should be offered pre- and in-service training regarding language learning. Finally, it is important for teachers to examine their language attitudes since prejudices can act as a barrier to LEP children having a positive learning experience in the classroom.

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Cheng, L.L. (1987). Assessing Asian language performance. Rockville, MD: Royal Tunbridge Wells.

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Table 1

Description of Demographic Variables

Variables	Frequencies	Percentages*	M	SD
LEVEL TAUGHT				
PreK-2nd	62	34		
3rd-5th	79	43		
6th-8th	24	13		
Secondary	19	10		
EVER HAD AN LEP STUDENT?				
Frequently	26	14		
Occasionally/Rarely	117	64		
Never	39	21		
FORMAL TRAINING IN TEACHING LEP STUDENTS?				
No	167	92		
Yes	15	8		
SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH?				
No	102	56		
Somewhat	64	35		
Fluently	16	9		

Table 1 (continued):

Variables	Frequencies	Percentages*	M	SD
EVER BEEN IN A COUNTRY WHERE YOU DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE?				
No	54	30		
Yes	128	70		
EDUCATION				
College Degree	6	3		
College & Workshops	47	26		
College & Some Grad. Work	79	44		
Graduate Degree	45	25		
YEARS TEACHING			8.1	7.2
AGE			39.6	3.8

Note. Ms and SDs reported for continuous variables only.

*Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Table 2

Description of Assistance Sought by Teachers of LEP Students

Person Contacted	Total Contacted	%Helpful	Not Contacted	Not Applicable
Fellow Teacher	108	74	17	46
School Specialist	102	69	12	60
Principal	92	53	23	53
School-District Specialist	82	59	28	60
State Office of Educ. Specialist	34	26	64	71
University or College Instructor	28	39	66	76

Table 3

Description of Information Teachers Have About Teaching LEP Students

Question	Responses: %Appropriate	%Incorrect	%Uncertain
Years Before Student Achieves Full Understanding (4-6 yrs)	5%	95%	
Kids Learn Language More Rapidly Than Adults (F)	7%	88%	5%
Parents Should Speak English at Home (F)	18%	65%	17%
English Learning Should Take Precedence Over Content (F)	40%	36%	25%

Note. Correct responses are in parentheses after each question.

Table 4

Language Attitude Items with Factor Loadings

Factor:	1	2	3	4
LANGUAGE POLITICS:				
Gov't business in English	.78	.26	-.10	.28
To be American, speak English	.76	-.04	.03	.13
English official language	.62	.20	-.16	.15
LANGUAGE SUPPORT:				
Should speak a foreign language	.04	.75	-.09	.08
Preservice language training	.13	.72	.02	-.02
Gov't support for lang. learning	.24	.54	-.32	-.27
LEP INTOLERANCE:				
LEP Detrimental to class	.37	.36	-.60	.24
Not motivated to learn	.04	.08	-.57	.07
Cry discrimination	.47	.12	-.55	.06
Unreasonable to teach LEP	.37	.35	-.55	.20
ENGLISH AT ALL COSTS:				
Parents should speak English	.20	-.11	-.00	.72
OK to lose language	.39	.27	-.05	.66
English vs. content	.06	.08	-.32	.55

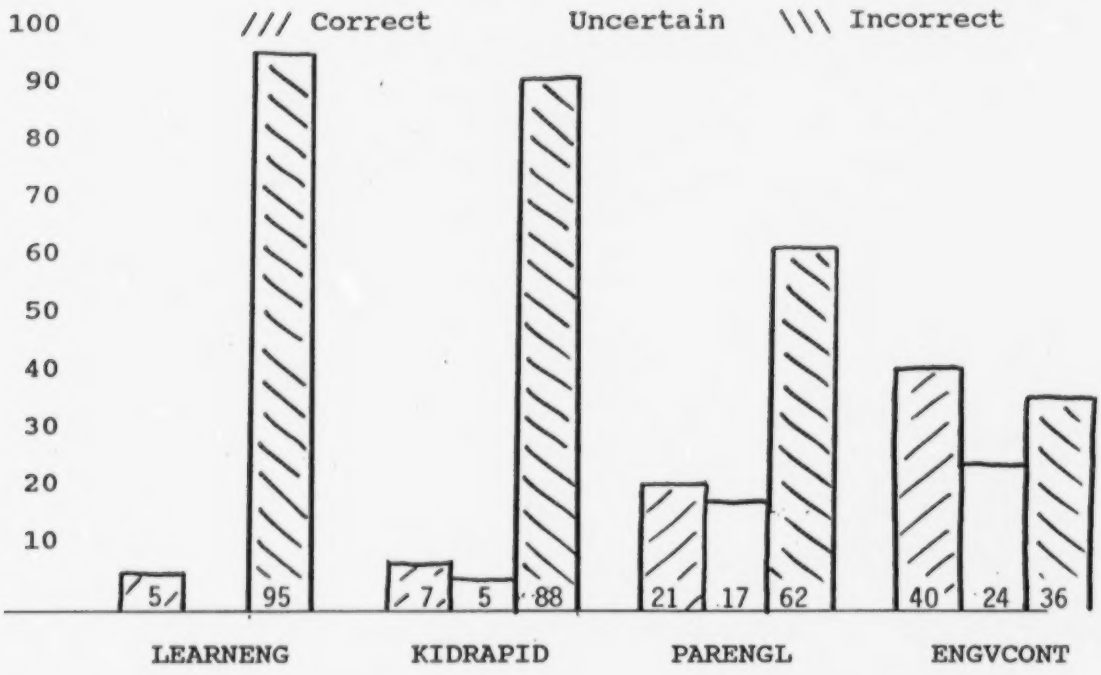
Note. Refer to the Appendix to find which items correspond to the variable descriptions listed in this table.

Table 5

Zero-order Correlation Matrix for Desire to Have LEP Student in Class Measure and Language-Attitude Factors with Means and Standard Deviations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. Desire LEP Student	1.00					4.3	1.5
2. Language Politics	-.25*	1.00				9.1	2.4
3. Language Support	-.21*	.15	1.00			6.7	2.1
4. LEP Intolerance	-.52*	.36*	.28*	1.00		9.8	2.6
5. English @ All Costs	-.20*	.32*	.01	.36*	1.00	9.0	2.2

Note. *$p<.01$.



LEARNENG: "If a child enters first grade and does not speak English, approximately how long do you think it will normally take him or her to learn English well enough to participate with full understanding in a regular classroom?"

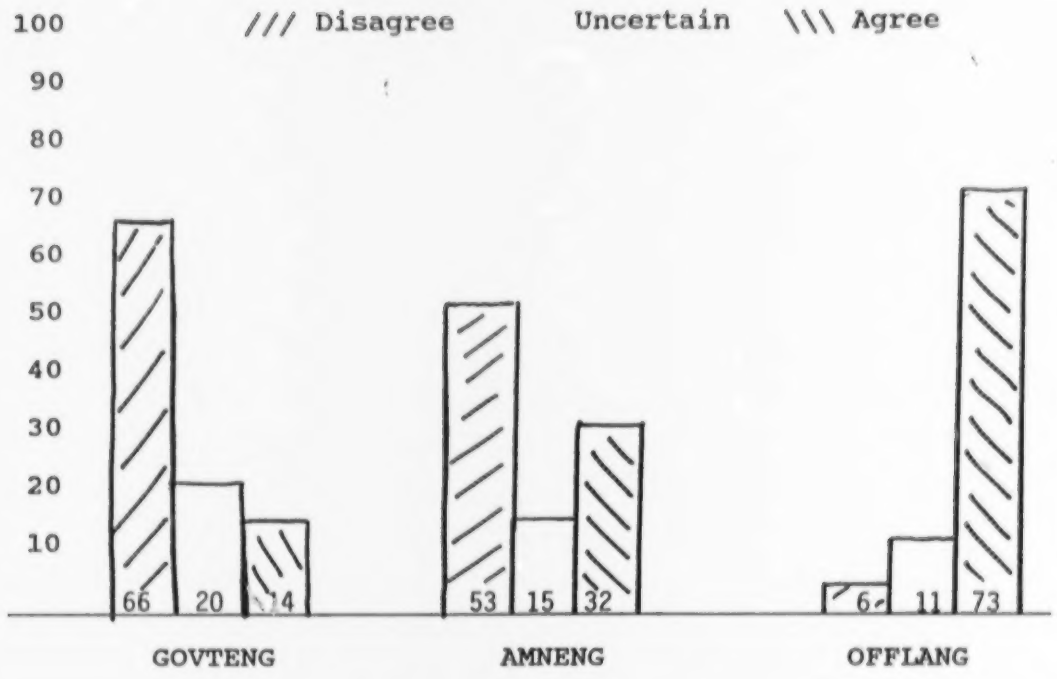
KIDRAPID: "Children learn a foreign language more rapidly and more easily than adults."

PARENGL: "Parents of [LEP] students should be counseled to speak English with their children whenever possible."

ENGVCONT: "At school, the learning of the English language by [LEP] children should take precedence over learning subject matter."

Figure 1

Responses to Information Items About Language Learning (in %)



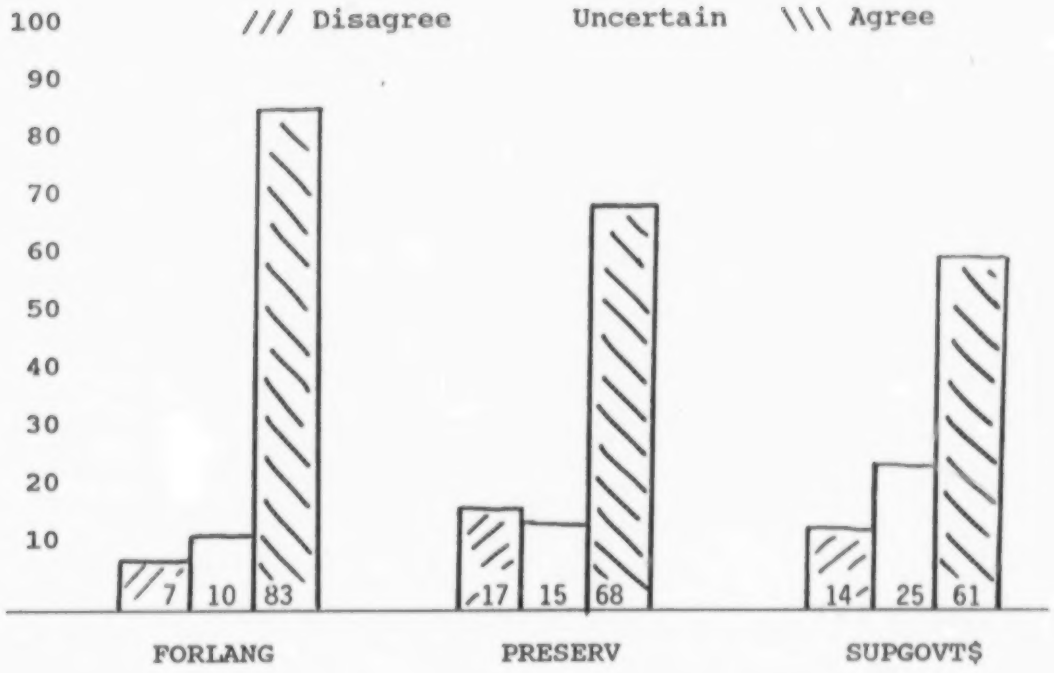
GOVTENG: "Local and state governments should require that all government business (including voting) be conducted only in English."

AMNENG: "To be considered American, one should speak English."

OFFLANG: "English should be the official language of the United States."

Figure 2

Responses to Language-Politics Factor Items (in %)



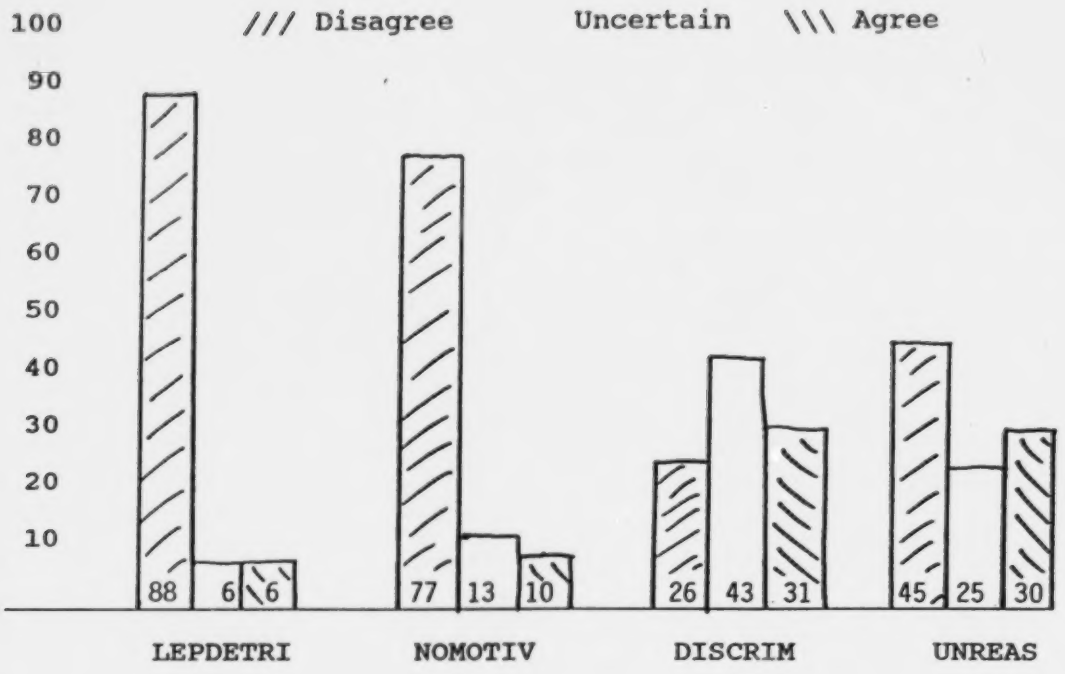
FORLANG: "It is important that people in the US learn a language in addition to English."

PRESERV: "Regular-classroom teachers should be required tc receive pre-service or in-service training to be prepared to meet the needs of linguistic minorities."

SUPGOVT$: "I would support the government spending additional money to provide better programs for linguistic-minority students in public schools."

Figure 3

Responses to Language-Support Factor Items (in %)



LEPDETRI: "Having a[n LEP] student in the classroom is detrimental to the learning of the other students."

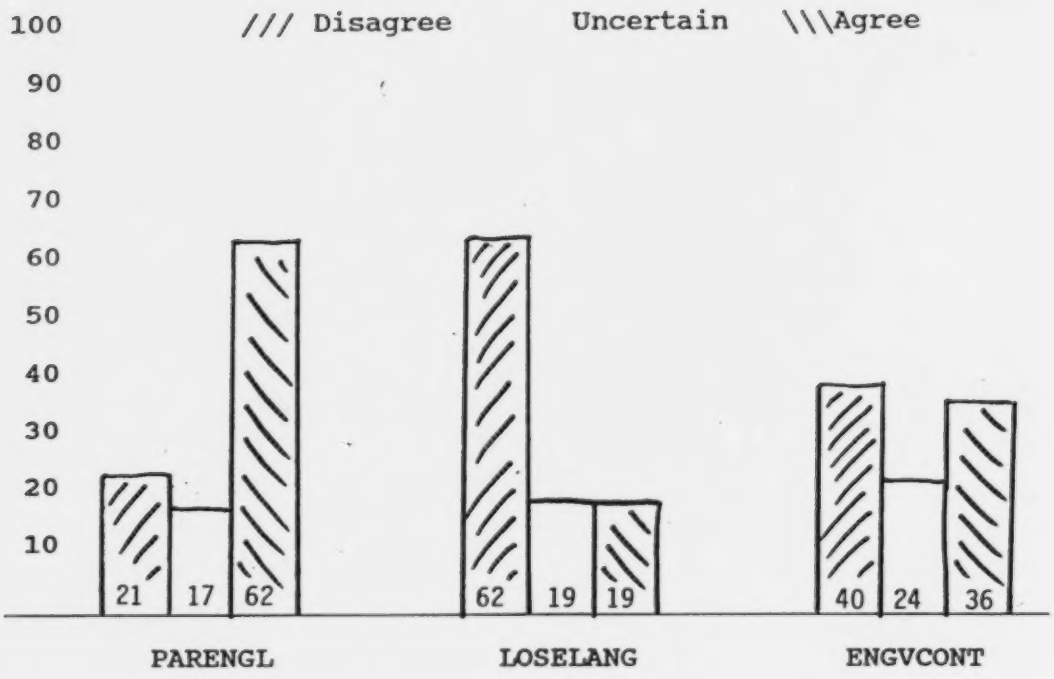
NOMOTIV: "Most [lep] children are not motivated to learn English."

DISCRIM: "[LEP] students often use unjustified claims of discrimination as an excuse for not doing well in school."

UNREAS: "It is unreasonable to expect a regular-classroom teacher to teach a child who does not speak English."

Figure 4

Responses to LEP-Intolerance Factor Items (in %)



PARENGL: "Parents of [LEP] students should be counseled to speak English with their children whenever possible."

LOSELANG: "The rapid learning of English should be a priority for [LEP] students even if it means they lose the ability to speak their native language."

ENGVCONT: "At school, the learning of the English language by [LEP] children should take precedence over learning subject matter."

Figure 5

Responses to English-at-All-Costs Factor Items (in %)

Appendix

Language-Attitude Items

1. To be considered American, one should speak English.
2. I would support the government spending additional money to provide better programs for linguistic-minority students in public schools.*
3. Parents of non- or limited-English-proficient students should be counseled to speak English with their children whenever possible.
4. It is important that people in the US learn a language in addition to English.*
5. It is unreasonable to expect a regular-classroom teacher to teach a child who does not speak English.
6. The rapid learning of English should be a priority for non-English-proficient or limited-English-proficient students even if it means they lose the ability to speak their native language.
7. Local and state governments should require that all government business (including voting) be conducted only in English.
8. Having a non- or limited-English-proficient student in the classroom is detrimental to the learning of the other students.

Appendix (continued):

9. Regular-classroom teachers should be required to receive pre-service or in-service training to be prepared to meet the needs of linguistic minorities.*
10. Most non- and limited-English-proficient children are not motivated to learn English.
11. At school, the learning of the English language by non- or limited-English-proficient children should take precedence over learning subject content.
12. English should be the official language of the United States.
13. Non- and limited-English-proficient students often use unjustified claims of discrimination as an excuse for not doing well in school.

Note. *Indicates reverse coding. All items were scored on a Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.